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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT-ELECT ASKS FOR SENATORS' SUPPORT ON FTA,
VISA WAIVER

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary. On September 16, President-elect Lee Myung-bak met with Senators Inouye and Stevens and the Ambassador at the President-elect's office. He talked in a relaxed manner about the alliance, ending Korea's ban on U.S. beef imports, the KORUS FTA, and the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Lee also made his oft-repeated vow that the new administration will work to rebuild trust in the U.S.-ROK alliance. The president-elect expressed his hope that the beef market could be reopened quickly so that the KORUS FTA ratification could move forward (while clearly indicating he hoped that the outgoing Roh Administration would relieve him of the burden of resolving the beef issue). The popular VWP is obviously on the president-elect's mind, and he appealed to the senators for their support in accelerating Korea's entry; Senator Stevens underscored the importance of secure travel documents. Lee listened intently to Senator Inouye's advice about bipartisan cooperation, which prompted applause from the two Korean lawmakers in the room. End Summary.

Warm Welcome

12. (SBU) Lee Myung-bak greeted Senator Daniel Inouye and Senator Ted Stevens in his office, saying that he was pleased to welcome the two men who have had such a strong interest in Korea and that he looked forward to continuing to work closely with them. Senator Inouye congratulated Lee on the election and, referring to Lee's designated envoy to the U.S., said that the president-elect had chosen a good man in Chung Mong-joon; the Senator mentioned he had first met Chung when he was a boy. Inouye said Chung would be well received in Washington. Lee Myung-bak responded that Representatives Chung and Park Jin, both of whom attended the meeting, knew the U.S. better than any other lawmakers and he was confident both would make good partners for Washington. Lee said Park could not join the delegation to Washington because he was too busy with the transition here in Seoul, prompting Park to quip that Chung was working on the foreign transition and Park was working on the domestic transition. The president-elect commented that both were equally important.

13. (SBU) Lee told the senators that there were problems with the U.S.-ROK alliance in the past, but the incoming administration will do its best to rebuild the trust that the

two countries shared after fighting together in the Korean War. He said the visit by the senators and other high-ranking U.S. officials meant a lot to the Koreans and gives them a "warm" feeling. Senator Inouye, for his part, said they found the cooperation and assistance from the Korean government on U.S. base issues -- specifically on the Pyeongtaek relocation -- to be impressive and promised to carry that message back to Washington. (Note: The Senators had visited Pyeongtaek/Camp Humphreys earlier in the day. End Note.)

Visa Waiver Program

14. (SBU) Lee appealed to the senators for help in accelerating Korea's entry into the Visa Waiver Program this year, and asked the Ambassador about the prospects. The Ambassador cautioned that it may take until early 2009 because of new security systems that need to be introduced on both sides and because of a delay on the Korean side in introducing its biometric e-passport.

Beef and the FTA

15. (C) The president-elect said he understood that the beef issue is bogging down progress on other bilateral issues -- specifically ratification of the FTA -- and that the market needs to be opened quickly. He expressed his hope that this would be worked out before he even takes office and that the U.S. would accept the proposal put forward by the Roh Moo-hyun government. The Ambassador responded that the U.S. is working with the current government on its proposal to

reopen the market, but might have to ask for favorable consideration from the next government in terms of the timing. Lee said he had a dinner meeting scheduled with President Roh and would probably raise the issue then.

16. (C) Lee said, since there were no reporters present, he could freely say that he likes American beef because it is good and it is cheap. To this the Ambassador added that it is also safe. The president-elect agreed that opening the beef market would be good for Korean consumers. He observed that rice consumption continues to decrease while beef consumption is rising, making Korea an even bigger potential market for U.S. beef exports. He also joked that after unification, North Korea will provide yet another market for U.S. beef exports. He noted that, since the beef market was completely open before the ban, returning to that state would mean market liberalization.

17. (SBU) The president-elect said that ratification of the KORUS FTA will create a big economic bloc between Korea and the U.S. that will reinforce our relationship. It is uncertain when the bill will be passed in the U.S., but, Lee noted, perhaps there would be a free flow of goods between the countries at about the same time there is a free flow of people, referring to the VWP. The Ambassador noted that while our hope was to get the beef issue resolved quickly and secure FTA ratification in the first half of 2008, it would take somewhat longer before we could bring Korea into the VWP. Lee's tongue-in-cheek reply was that it is better to have people than cows moving back and forth across borders. Senator Stevens responded emphatically by urging Lee not push that logic too far. A number of increased security measures went into place after the events of September 11, 2001, and they would never again be taken down. He cautioned the President-elect that the U.S. will not compromise on the requirement to introduce secure travel documents (i.e. the e-passport). The Senator said that Korea should be grateful that the Congress passed legislation specially designed to bring about Korea's entry into VWP.

Bipartisan Cooperation

18. (SBU) Senator Inouye noted that problems the U.S. faces this year, including a presidential election, make it difficult for the U.S. Congress to get things done. He pointed out the good relationship he has with Senator Stevens despite the fact that the two are from different parties and said this relationship has helped them get unanimous approval in record time on the usually contentious defense budget. Inouye said that even though they disagree quite often, they work together "without being disagreeable." Lee listened closely as Inouye counseled him to learn to work well with his political opponents, and noted that he and Senator Stevens have even campaigned for one another. When he was done, both Park Jin and Chung Mong-joon applauded, though only time will tell if they take his advice to heart.

Comment

19. (C) Despite the relaxed but often awkward atmospherics, the president-elect seemed to enjoy his discussion with the senators and the Ambassador. His focus on economic issues is clear, though he obviously hopes that the beef issue will not be one that his administration needs to resolve.
VERSHBOW